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Visualization in Hindu Practice

Summary and Keywords

Broadly, visualization stands for a specific mode of imagination in which certain objects or concepts are “viewed as” or “viewed in light of” something else. In the religious context, something is “discovered” as the sacred in the process of visualization. In essence, what constitutes an object or image as sacred is the way this entity is encountered through visualization: it is this act that provides a surplus of value to the entity. When we visualize something, we activate multiple cognitive mechanisms and the added meaning is gained through metonymic and metaphoric structures. The new value of an entity or the discovery of new meaning is often a consequence of the blend of the existing inputs. Historically, ritualized visualization evolved in the Hindu context alongside the Vedic rituals and later became a central feature of everyday Hinduism. Tantric traditions in particular utilize visualization to gain greater access to the mechanism of the mind. Studying visualization thus not only reveals how an imaginative life meshes with reality in constituting the sacred, but it also demonstrates the power of imagination in transforming everyday reality.

Keywords: visualization, tantra, mandala, mantra, image, imagination, Bhairava, Kālī

Visualization in Classical Hinduism

Historical Development

Classical Hindu literature makes an exemplary case for understanding the role imagination plays in everyday transaction, particularly in ritual activities. The entire literature dedicated to *upāsanā*¹ and the scholastic debate over its scope demonstrate an intricate relationship between seeing things as and seeing things the way they actually are. This makes visualization or ‘seeing things as’ an essential step in recognizing reality.

The scope of visualization becomes very wide in Hindu religious life once the discourse on *upāsanā* is included within its domain. Three key aspects of Hindu religious life involve rituals (including Vedic sacrifices), meditative practices or visualizations, and the discourse on the self. Upaniṣadic discourse on various *vidyās* or “wisdom” practices mostly relate to visualizations. Some of the most prominent *vidyās* involve: Antaryāmin (BĀU III.7.1), Akṣara (BĀU III.8.8), Jyotis (BĀU IV.4.16), Udgītha (Chāndogya I.3.9, BĀU I.3), Madhu (Chāndogya III.1.1, BĀU III.7.1), Prāṇa (Chāndogya V.1.1), Pañcāgni (Chāndogya V.10), Vaiśvānara (Chāndogya V.18.1), Bhūman (Chāndogya VII.23.1), Dahara (Chāndogya VIII.1.1), Akṣara (Chāndogya VIII.14.1), and Ānandamaya (Taittirīya II.1.1).² While the two terms *upāsanā* and *vidyā* survive in the subsequent tantric development of the various methods of visualization, the practice itself is identified by *dhyāna*, *bhāvanā*, *kalpanā*, or derivatives from the same verbal roots. In tantric visualization practices, deities, mandalas, or other entities are visualized in certain locations within the body (eye-brow, heart, base, crown, etc.) or in the world (sky, lake, cremation ground, or any other background); objects of visualization are given order and organized only to be layered in a sequence meaningful primarily to the visualizing subject himself; a correlation between the entity visualized and its reference is confirmed; and a specific relation between the object of visualization and the visualizing subject is established. If what is being visualized is basic emotion, for instance compassion or altruism, a cultivation of the heart and transformation of subjective attitude is sought after, and the practice culminates with certain degree of subjective transformation. As a consequence, things imagined transform the subject’s attitude toward the world, and this transformation leads to a certain degree of tranquility. In essence, although the objects of visualization are fictional, their effect in the mind is real.

Varieties of Visualization

Even with this expansion on visualization techniques, the question still remains: Does this practice, which in itself rests on seeing things not the way they really are, grant an actualization of something as it is? First of all, visualization is a mental act, whether in the form of imagination, fantasy, remembering, attention, or a fusion of all of these. If the self is identified with consciousness (as is the case in the Advaita of Śaṅkara, the monistic tantric traditions, the Patañjalian school of yoga, to name a few), and if consciousness is by its nature reflexive (acceptable to all the aforementioned schools and also to some schools of Mahayana Buddhism), every instance of awareness is embedded with self-awareness, and there is no additional action directed toward its revelation. With every action, we either acquire or relinquish something. And we do not acquire things that we already have. The self as the basis of experience is always given to every mode of consciousness, following the aforementioned schools. Visualization practices are neither necessary nor capable to reveal this base consciousness. Furthermore, there are myriad visualizations and all these forms of “knowing as” cannot be identical to “knowing it.” Among the classical philosophers, Śaṅkara makes the strongest claims regarding the limitation of visualization practices.

Regardless of the debate over the efficacy of visualization to self-realization in an absolute sense, all Hindu traditions accept that meditative techniques that advance the cognitive skills of active imagination, expand the duration of attention over a period of time, and aid the imprint of essential teachings in a compressed frame of visualization are also complementary to the recognition of the self. This sequence for realizing the way things are by means of purifying the mind is also credited for granting various supernormal powers identified as *siddhis*. A noteworthy distinction, though, is that this process of gaining supernormal powers as well as self-realization is supposed to occur both by means of “visualization” or by simply focusing on one or another aspect, a practice called *samyama*, which requires a heightened level of attention. Although the basic cognitive mechanism of *samyama*, as prescribed in Patañjalian yoga, and the visualization practices broadly addressed as *upāsanā* or *dhāraṇā* are the same, the fundamental difference between these is the explicit recognition of visualization practices to be “seeing as” which is not the case in the *samyama* practices. We can make another distinction on this ground that ‘visualization’ or ‘seeing as’ is the mechanism credited for acquiring supernormal powers where the focus is in creating a strong belief disregarding its factuality whereas liberating knowledge is identified as knowing the way things are. Both *samyama* and *upāsanā* have nonetheless been used to facilitate the subject’s clear access to and understanding of his own mind, where the individual encounters his essential nature. At an introductory level, visualization practice involves mentally constructing deity images and mandalas, seeing the mantras in different locales, or consciously cultivating specific emotions. The higher and more complex visualization practices rely on a simultaneous projection of multiple inputs in a single mode of cognition, a systematic layering of complex imagery in a single domain, establishing multiple correlates where an entity X

stands for Y stands for Z, and establishing identity between different inputs within the frame of subject, object, and the act of visualization. In its most exalted form, visualization transforms subject's personal domain, with him actualizing himself as the deity being visualized.

Visualization in devotional traditions goes one step further where the image "becomes" alive and the devotees seek an inter-subjective exchange with the visualized object. With an intermixing of narratives associated with the deity, by eliciting the central emotions evoked through the narratives, and through suggestions that transform the subject's self-assessment, devotional visualization brings the narratives to life with the devotees reliving the scene. This devotional practice rests on creating a live image of the deity, extending the imagined consciousness, and thereby transforming the self and the object of visualization in an inter-subjective dialogical platform.

Broadly, there are five different types of emotional dispositions prescribed in the devotional texts: the *bhāva* or the emotion of peace (*sānta*), the emotion of erotic love (*mādhurya*), the emotion of parental love (*vātsalya*), the emotion of servitude (*dāsyā*), and the emotion of friendly love (*sakhya*). Vaiṣṇava Sahajīyā literature epitomizes friendly love. Most of the tantric and yogic visualization practices including the *vidyā* or *upāsanā* prescribed in the Upaniṣads can be described as evoking the emotion of peace. In cultivating the emotion of erotic love (*mādhurya*), devotees establish personal relationship with the deity as a loving partner. The devotees of Kṛṣṇa experiencing themselves as Rādhā or a Gopī is the most common form of this practice.³ Subjects not only report transformed subjective experience during this practice, but they may also feel the loss of consciousness or enter some form of yogic absorption (*samādhi*). Playing with Kṛṣṇa by assuming one's role as his playmate is the most common form of practicing *sakhya*. Subjects can also project parental love, either by assuming the deity as one's child (playing the role of Yaśodā in the context of Kṛṣṇa) or assuming oneself as the child (as if Kumāra, the child of Śiva). Vasava's devotion to Śiva elicits this particular emotion. Assuming oneself at the service of God elicits the emotional relation of servitude (*dāsyā*). Contemporary studies on Vaiṣṇava Sahajīyā traditions and other devotional movements have highlighted the role imagination plays in everyday religious life. Religious practice, if read in this light, becomes a course for transforming the subject and his outlook through a meticulous repetition of fanciful imagination or visualization, wherein the subject finds some form of relation with the divine and finds himself acting according to the divine plan. A particular form of meditation called the visualization upon the acts of Lord Kṛṣṇa (*līlāsmaraṇa*) clearly explains this process. By approximating the acts of Kṛṣṇa to different periods within a day, devotees visualize these acts as the day proceeds, thus reliving the entire life of Kṛṣṇa and, by extension, possessing his companionship daily.⁴ Whether during the course of fancy, as in the case of devotional visualizations, or in real-life occurrences, the transformative experiences the subjects undergo are real, and their emotional response toward the world becomes remapped through the surge of emotions that occur as a consequence of visualization.

There is yet another type of cognitive transformation through visualization: experiencing *āveśa/samāveśa*, or entering into the altered state of consciousness or penetrating into the subjective domain of the other. Broadly, these terms are translated as “possession” and refer to a range of altered states of consciousness. Subjects that undergo *āveśa* report that they have had a transformed state of subjectivity. Objectively, these subjects depict the signs of an altered conscious state. In all these accounts, subjectivity is considered fluid, with visualizing subjects being able to manipulate their subjective states and at times having altered personalities. Remarkably, these subjects appear in total control of their normal and altered subjective states. Accordingly, subjectivity is a fluid experience that can be manipulated, and with sustained visualization practices, one can project one’s subjective experience into another subject, divine or human. In this alteration of experience, there is not always a successive cultivation of experience that relies on the transformation of the external scenario to the inner or subjective domain. Subjects experiencing this transformed state may display specific gestures associated with the deity. Subjects may or may not be able to recollect their transformed state of subjectivity upon returning to their normal state of consciousness. The examples outlined below highlight the varied forms of visualization practice and its corresponding effects. But before outlining the details of visualization practices, a brief historical account is relevant to highlight its evolution.

Historical Development

Body, whether divine or human, is itself one of the most common objects of visualization, and the issue of whether gods are embodied appears in early exegetical texts.⁵ Yāska cites different accounts that portray deities with human limbs and attributes, although the majority in the early classical Vedic period tend to reject divine corporeality, exemplified with the Mīmāṃsakas rejecting the position that gods are endowed with bodies.⁶ The commentator Śabara is familiar with different drawings of gods, most likely used for visualization practices.

Śabara says: “People have the conventional view that gods are embodied. They draw Yama carrying a stick with his hand, and describe him accordingly. Likewise, [they draw] Varuṇa carrying a rope with his hand, [and] Indra carrying a bolt.”⁷ He cites multiple passages in this context from the Ṛgveda that identify the neck, belly, and hands of gods,⁸ and eventually concludes that these are mere hyperbole. Assuming images that correspond to an abstract concept is the first step toward visualization where the subjects are fully conscious of the distinction between “seeing” and “seeing as.” This distinction becomes blurred in the later periods, with devotional and tantric literature giving prominence to the deities in the body.

The terms used to describe the imagery are sufficient to highlight the central aspects of visualization. These are the *mūrtis* or the manifest forms for the abstract concepts; these are the *bimbas* or the images that portray something else; these are ‘constructions’ or *ākṛti*. Finally these are the imitations or the *anukāra*. *Mūrti* not only describes an image but also identifies the process of providing form to the formless. An image, based on this etymological understanding, shapes or materializes the abstract concepts into a specific form. As the term suggests, something beyond the perceptual field is brought to appearance through an image (*mūrti*). In the process of consolidating the abstract, whether it be emotions, thoughts, or both, that which is subtle in its elementary form becomes tangible. Thus, *mūrti* explicitly reveals that imagination, image, and their relation to the transcendent are related concepts, and are embedded in the very notion of image.

Another key element for visualization linked with the ritual worship of images is the ritual installation of life (*prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā*). Upon completion of this ritual, aspirants respond to the image as alive. This ritual can be very brief or quite long, taking only a few minutes or occurring over months, depending on how graphic the intended rituals are. The life of a deity can be invoked and placed in any object, be it an image, a vase, or a geometric design. A meticulous visualization occurs in the course of this placement, as the process involves seeing the limbs of the deity and situating those limbs in the projected space. The aspirants thereafter consider the image as living and treat it as such. Both the placement ritual and those that follow, such as bathing or feeding the deity, involve meticulous visualization. With the invocation to the life-forces to come and reside in the projected space, on occasion with short mantras such as, “Let all the *prāṇa* abide here. Let all the *prāṇa* move here. This is the image for worship,”⁹ the practitioners consider the life-

installation achieved. Essential to this ritual is a complex process of mental projection. Along with chanting the seed syllables, a living body is projected onto the statue, where the sensory and motor faculties of the projected body are reinforced through the placement of mantras. The rituals that bring the image to life are in essence projective acts of imagination.

What does it mean to “visualize a deity” in this Hindu tantric or devotional context, or what cognitive mechanisms facilitate such a practice? The answer lies in the course of practice itself. It evokes memory by recalling the myths associated with the deity being visualized. It involves imagination, with the image being considered alive and the subject engaging in mental acts of ritual worship. The practice rests on the attentive mode of awareness, as the visualization demands a constant flow of consciousness toward the same object (i.e., mental focus). The active gaze (visualizing) bridges the binaries of subject and object, and this singular awareness is the ultimate meaning, encompassing both the act of visualization and its object, an image. Visualization ultimately involves the comprehending mode of awareness, for when an image is viewed, the subject also brings to mind the significance of each and every attribute. This cognitive function of imagination is not categorically distinct from other activities that involve imagination, such as listening to music, viewing an image, or participating in ritualized acts. What is unique here is the meticulous effort to create “reality” through imagination. Accordingly, visualization practice rests on subjects being aware of the higher- or second-order consciousness and developing an inward flow of consciousness reflexively revealing itself.

Returning to the ritual of visualization, the manuals describe visualization with terms derived from *√dhyai*, *√bhū*, and *√kṛp*, and the Buddhist manuals often call them *dhāriṇīs* from the root *√dhṛ*. What exactly is expected in this ritual process can be described by the terminal meaning, through analysis of these roots. While the term *dhāriṇī* simply suggests holding something in mind, these *dhāriṇīs* are also used to make actual talismans that practitioners sometimes wear. The words derived from other roots relate to psychological aspects. *√dhyai* refers to contemplation, a reflective thinking, from which the term *dhyāna* is derived. *√bhū* describes bringing something to reality, materializing something, or giving shape to something abstract. *√kṛp* relates to the imaginative domain of consciousness, with the term *kalpanā* for “imagination” derived from the same root. Rather than considering this imagination as illusion, Vedic poets described the function of the creator god in terms of *√kṛp*. The imaginative power of the seers materialized entities into reality. The process of visualization, along these lines, is to bring something to reality through a contemplative mental process.

Ritualizing Visualization: A Few Examples

The above discussion is sufficient to claim that ritualized practice of imagination, identified as visualization, is at the heart of Hindu religious life. This premise leads to a problem: the topic of visualization becomes so broad that it is not possible to address in depth. I have therefore limited myself to the most central features of ritualized visualization. These paradigmatic practices also provide examples for theorizing visualization.

Visualization as Recall

One of the most widely practiced sequences for visualization is that of recollection (*smaraṇa*), most commonly occurring during a practitioner's morning rituals. In only three to six stanzas, the texts that detail "morning recollection" evoke the central mythical domains and guide the subject in mapping his reality accordingly. These hymns, generally identified as "morning-recollection" (*prātaḥ-smaraṇa*) are vivid, in short meter, and summarize the central aspects of the deity.¹⁰ For example, the "morning recollection" of Durgā follows:

I remember you, the highest divinity, in the morning with the glow of the rays of the autumn moon, adorned with beads, [and with the] earrings shaped like a crocodile and decorated with gems, having one thousand arms [shining] blue, distinguished with the divine weapons. I bow you, Caṇḍī, in the morning, of infinite forms, the one skilled in destroying the demons, in particular Mahiṣāsura, Caṇḍa, Muṇḍa, Śumbhāsura, who is fond of stupefying Brahmā, Indra, Rudra, and the sages and who is an embodiment of all the gods. I pray in the morning to you who bestows what is desired to those who pray [to you], who holds the entire world, who removes all sufferings, who is the cause of liberation from the bondage of *samsāra* by knowing the highest power of illusion [generated by] the supreme Viṣṇu.¹¹

Visualization as a Substitute for External Ritual

Another set of texts, dedicated to mental offering (*mānasa-pūjā*), epitomizes the cognitive faculty of imagination, with a graphic course of visualization. These texts are a substitute for an extensive external ritual worship and can vary greatly in length. Some are fairly short, and only detail the major ritual offerings of incense, flowers, or a lamp. Others may outline sixteen or even sixty-four different offerings. These substitutions to external rituals can detail visualization of the deity's limbs one by one, or can outline specific deities residing in different parts of the mandala. In such cases, the very reading of the text acts as an internalized ritual that again substitutes for the external worship of the deity. This marks a shift from an ordinary household ritual to a yogic orientation, and this tendency

can be found as early as in the Brāhmaṇa literature. One of the most commonly cited texts in popular Hinduism for such visualization dedicated to Śiva follows:

I offer you the seat of gems, cool water for a bath, a divine robe adorned with many jewels, the lotion made of musk, flowers such as jasmine and *campaka* and *bilva* leaves, flame and incense, all imagined by my heart. Lord! I have prepared with my mind sweet rice, five kinds of food made from milk and yoghurt, bananas, vegetables, camphor-scented water and betel leaf. I offer you the mental creation (*saṅkalpa*) of a canopy, two yak-tail whisks, a fan and a spotless mirror, the music from a lute, kettledrum, *mṛdaṅga*, and other drums, songs, dance, and prostration, and various hymns. You are my self, the goddess Pārvatī my intellect, my senses are your attendants, my body your abode, and the pleasure through my senses, your worship. My slumber is the state of *samādhi*, all the speech your prayer. Śambhu! Whatever act I do, all of that is for your satisfaction.¹²

Visualizing a Deity's Image

Visualizing the image of a deity is one of the most common aspects of tantric practice. This process not only involves setting up the stage and seeing the image, as if carving from head to toe, it also includes understanding the correlates of the colors applied in the imagery. Subjects are supposed to be aware of the significance of weapons and gestures (tantric semiotics), and at the same time allow animation of the image by visualizing the deity image as alive and engaging in some form of inter-subjective exchange (greeting, offering a seat, washing the feet, offering a drink, offering food, etc.). The penultimate goal of such visualization, however, rests on the recognition that the world, the deity being visualized, and the aspirant are one and the same in the cosmic level. In the non-dual tantras, the body of the deity is mapped both to resemble that of the aspirant and have correlation with the cosmic principles. A single example from the classical text, *Bhairavānukaraṇastotra* (BAS), suffices to highlight this relation.

Bhairava is the central deity of Kaula tantra. According to the Trika tradition that Kṣemarāja upholds, Bhairava stands for both the supreme deity and the state of experience of a yogin in the state of highest absorption (*samāveśa*) wherein the yogin experiences himself as Bhairava. This experience is the culmination of the practice of visualization in the imagery of Bhairava. The experience of non-duality, where the self is experienced as identical to the totality of manifestation and also with the deity, is cultivated in this visualizing process. This process, thus, is an active gaze upon Bhairava imagery, relating specific gestures and weapons of Bhairava with the central tenets of the Trika doctrine. Accordingly, the focus on Bhairava's imagery is no longer a mere observation of it, but a conscious and creative gaze by which the consciousness of the aspirant is oriented toward non-dual experience while focusing upon the image of the deity as support.

The visualization practice begins with the identification of the self with Bhairava, ascribing to him aspects of self-awareness. In light of this, the physical gestures, posture, and ornaments are deciphered as instances of cognition and specific feelings. Seeing the body of Bhairava, in this paradigm, is recognizing the self or consciousness actively engaged through the senses in grasping the externals and returning back to the self. For the subject visualizing Bhairava, the highest realization does not isolate the self from its engagement in the world. The ever-enfolding and unfolding entity, Bhairava or the self, is described here as simultaneously transcendent and immanent. While the essential nature of Bhairava is beyond the triad of cognized object, the process of cognition, and the cognizing subject, at the same time, he also embodies this triad. The image of Bhairava is thus the intermediary ground of form and the formless. Bhairava, following this understanding, is the latent force in all manifestation, comparable to the lines that constitute alphabets or images.

That Bhairava embodies paradoxes is vivid in all his gestures and aspects. For instance, the fire and water elements signify poison and ambrosia, death and life. Visualized as his attributes, these contradictory elements reside in harmony within Bhairava (BAS 12). According to Kṣemarāja (BAS 12), in holding a skull cup filled with blood, Bhairava metaphorically enjoins the practitioner to likewise imbibe the fluids of life in an embrace of sensory pleasure (BAS 31). Bhairava drinks blood, a metaphor for the self enjoying life, recognizing sensory pleasure as a valid means for entering into the heart of reality. Bhairava, as uninterrupted self-awareness, is ever-present, even when the senses are fully engaged with the world (BAS 37). The supreme reality, although eternally free, assumes the form of Bhairava to demonstrate that one who knows reality is free, even though duality may appear within the phenomenal realm (BAS 40). The cremation ground, where Bhairava resides, is populated with ghosts and goblins. This, according to Kṣemarāja, signifies awareness-in-itself as free from modifications, even while appearing in the form of segmented cognitive modes signified by the surrounding beings (BAS 41). Bhairava is the essential nature of awareness-in-itself and the deities surrounding him in his mandala express the mantras, or words that reveal awareness in all its glory (BAS 43). The central deity and the deities in the periphery can be compared with the self and the body, with the senses allowing the self to embrace the reality that is externalized.

In this course of visualization as outlined by Kṣemarāja, the garland made of hands and heads signifies the collection of individual selves that dissolve into Bhairava's nature of bliss and awareness (BAS 13). Bhairava thus is the image of singular self-awareness, where the phenomenal selves are subordinated and become mere objects of ornamentation. Following BAS 14, the entrails that Bhairava wears and grotesquely displays highlight the bondage of the body. Both what Bhairava wears and how he appears demonstrate specific modes of the self being engaged in the world. For instance, the lion's skin that Bhairava wears or stretches taut signifies an illusory and stained state that does not exist in consciousness, devoid of all forms (BAS 15).

In this visualization, the rope signifies time, and since Bhairava, the deity or self-awareness incarnate, carries it, time is in his grip (BAS 18). The hook signifies the reabsorbing aspect of Bhairava that dissolves difference (BAS 19), leading to the solitary nature of Bhairava-awareness. Deities such as Brahmā and Viṣṇu refer to the divinity manifest within the realm of causation and bound in terms of time. Bhairava's bow and arrow demonstrate the reabsorption of the deities that allow the world to manifest (BAS 20). The gestures of boon and fearlessness, along the same lines, demonstrate the liberating nature of Bhairava, granting release from suffering in the world (BAS 21-22).

Even the archaic attributes of Bhairava carry deeper meaning, and visualization brings this meaning to the surface. By carrying the freshly chopped head that signifies illusion, Bhairava demonstrates his mastery over it (BAS 23). The skull-staff of Bhairava signifies that the self is the foundation of creation (BAS 24). As the staff of Bhairava bears skulls, consciousness, likewise, holds the world manifest in the form of multiple subjects. Another gesture of Bhairava, carrying freshly chopped heads by their tufts of hair, confirms this same aspect: awareness in terms of I-sense is manifest in manifoldness (BAS 32).

The musical instruments of Bhairava are visualized as mental modifications. The lute, bell, and drum thus refer to three varieties of mental constructions, and Bhairava, the enlightened self-awareness, demonstrates his control over them (BAS 25). In Kṣemarāja's terms, the strand of beads that Bhairava holds refers to his pulsating nature that maintains the world through emission and reabsorption by opening and closing the sensory orifices (BAS 34). The trident refers to the triadic divinities, Parā, Parāparā, and Aparā, who comprise the fundamental nature of Bhairava (BAS 26). The bolt, with six spokes, demonstrates the all-pervasive, divine nature that permeates the three different modes of awareness in the form of subject, object, and cognition (BAS 27). Other weapons, such as the stick that Bhairava wields, demonstrate his control over the world (BAS 28), while the club and axe signify the power that shatters difference (BAS 29). By holding a citron, Bhairava identifies consciousness as the seminal nature of the cognized world (BAS 33).

Bhairava wears severed hands and bones smeared with blood, demonstrating that the world is nonetheless pure, because even the most impure elements are fundamentally of the nature of Brahman (BAS 35). Bhairava's nudity, along these lines, stands for his eternally free nature that never undergoes suffering caused by limitation (BAS 38). The dark blue color of Bhairava's body refers to his all-reabsorbing nature (BAS 39), dissolving all light and manifestation into his deep hue. Bhairava's third eye shows that those who are merged within the bliss of self-awareness perceive that the pleasure obtained through sensory objects is futile, as external objects are momentary, like bubbles on the surface (BAS 36). In Kṣemarāja's cosmology, Bhairava's image itself is "the seal," an unmistakable symbol that grants the bliss of self-awareness and liberates the aspirant from the notion of difference that is rooted in the world (BAS 44-45). This visualization culminates with the recognition of Bhairava even in experiencing duality.

Body: The Field of Visualization

The course of visualization brings the body to the center of attention. Vedic rituals map the body of the sacrificial animal to correspond to the cosmos, with specific limbs and deities being semiotically linked. The Ṛgveda Hymns of Puruṣa, for example, map the body of the Puruṣa on the cosmos, pointing out that the body of Puruṣa encompasses both animate and inanimate entities. The Brāhmaṇa texts relate the limbs of the sacrificial animal with the deities. This process advances further in the Upaniṣadic texts. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (I.1), for instance, relates the body of the sacrificial horse to the cosmic aspects and events. Yogic visualization practices exploit this early imagery and advance a subtle physiology, and by means of visualization, the aspirants “create” or project another layer of meaning on top of the physical body. Tantric visualization advances body-centric rituals one step further by using the body as a template for recognizing the cosmic correlates of the self. In this process, the real body becomes a canvas for the projected body. As a consequence, the aspirants transform their bodily attitude and somatosensory faculties, cultivated by means of sustained visualization of one’s own body.

Visualization practices focused on the body in general follow the following constituents:

1. I. The body of the deity is comprised of mantras.¹³
2. II. The deity emanates in the form of the mandala. Thus the body of the deity is the mandala itself.¹⁴
3. III. The human body is a temple (*deha-devagrha*).¹⁵
4. IV. The human body is identical to the cosmos (*pīṇḍa-brahmāṇḍa*).¹⁶
5. V. The body is an expression of bliss and awareness (*cidānanda*).

The first among these, the body comprised of mantras, is a visualization practice common to all tantric practices. This practice is also found in Smārta Hinduism. Central to this practice is the visualization that deities and their mantras are identical and the deity images emerge out of the mantras and retrieve back to the sacred phonemes. In this process, the deity image becomes the representation of the inner/real body of the deity that is comprised of mantras.¹⁷ The term *mūrti* is often used in tantras to refer to this very sonic body of the deity. This concept is explicit in the *Kubjikāmata* passages such as, “The goddess born of the sixteen syllables . . . she is Mālinī . . . She is Maheśvarī whose body is made of mantras.”¹⁸ These “mothers” are aligned with Sanskrit letters and segmented in eight groups. The most external square in the mandala is surrounded by these Mātrikās, who are associated with their Bhairava consorts.

In the ritual of installing the phonemes and mantras throughout the body (*nyāsa*), the aspirant visualizes select letters in different limbs of the aspirant’s body. This projection supposedly transforms the physical body into the mantric body, allowing the aspirant to corporeally feel the presence of the deity. In addition to installing distinct letters, the ritual culminates with the graphic installation of the words and complete mantras. Just as a

single body in this depiction is the collection of various mantras, so also is the deity. This ritual correlation of the deity to specific syllables, colors, and body parts gives rise to complex imagery, and the image of the deity represents various divinities, each comprised of different arrangements of the mantras.

The second visualization upon the mandalas is equally ubiquitous to tantric practices. Basic mandala structures are as ancient as the Vedic rituals, although tantras expand upon the early concept and give rise to complex mandala imagery. Mandalas also provide the blueprint for the sacrificial altar, a temple, or a house. Visualizing mandalas for the cosmic phenomena is vivid in the *Vāstu* mandala: “Its square is symbolical of all cyclical time, the day, the month, the year and the wider cycle marked by the recurrence of eclipses.”¹⁹

Another equally prominent aspect of visualization located in the body is a correlation established between the aspirant’s body and the temple of the deity of his preference. *Mahārthamañjarī* (MM) describes the relation between the body and the altar in the following terms:

The instrumental deities pulsate in the altar, in one’s own body that is identical to the cosmos. The supreme Śiva, the ocean of awareness, also pulsates in the midst of them.

(MM 34)

Mahānayaprakāśa explains why the body is equated with an altar:

Sperm is the supreme [essence] originated of the mingling of the expansion of both Śiva and Śakti. The great seat, the very body, is originated of it.²⁰

In the visualization practice outlined in the MM that identifies the body with a mandala, the sense organs of the aspirant are equated with the “instrumental deities” (*karaṇa devīs*), the energies that are necessary to manifest the world. Within this system, the supreme deity Śiva is identical to the self and pure consciousness. Due to this relation, the functioning of the senses in grasping the externals is paralleled with the expression of the energies of Śiva in giving rise to the world. The term *devī* applies to both the self-effulgent deities in the mandala and the auto-reflexive nature of consciousness. The metaphor of the ocean invokes the concept that the senses are like waves, touching the shores of their corresponding objects. The text is explicit that “the very body is the primary altar,”²¹ and this is congruent with the view that the body is a mandala, where the center stands for the self and the surrounding circles describe inner and external senses. When the body is conceived of as an altar, the somatic functions are identified as ritual worship to the deity:

He is to be worshipped there with the nectar of the sense objects, the drink of the virile ones, [enriched] with the fragrance underlying the flowers of self-awareness [offered] in the cup of the mind.

What is felt in this cognitive process is the embodied emotions. The text is explicit that the nectar, while a singular element, is manifest in the forms of fear, grief, and delight.²² The supreme deity, or consciousness, is revealed in its engagement with objects through sensory contact. And when the same sensory engagement stimulates emotions, the self is engrossed with the stimuli. Tantric texts claim that the self is immediately grasped in this active engagement when the visualizing subject reflexively gazes upon his own mind while being actively engaged. Ritual worship in this paradigm is the self-awareness present in the active engagement of consciousness in the world.

The body extends in the physical space, and it is the body that senses the world. Tantric visualization seeks to establish a parallelism between the body and the cosmos, another key constituent of visualizing the body. Adding two concepts, the tantric perspective on the body expands upon the antecedent literature that posits the body as mirroring the totality. The concept that “the body is the cosmos” (*pīnda-brahmāṇḍa*), reiterated in various terms in both tantric and *Hathayoga* literature, confirms the body as both the cosmic and ecological center. The next concept, that the phenomenal reality experienced in the felt body is the mirror image of the absolute (*bimba-pratibimba*), describes the monistic tantric cosmogony.²³

MM reiterates in explicit terms that the body is of the nature of the cosmos.²⁴ This is further explained in the *Nāth* literature.²⁵ The deity image is recognized as embodying the same concept, clearly described in the depiction of *Navātman* or *Ānandabhairava*:

The supreme Lord of the nature of the highest bliss is comprised of nine circles (*vyūhas*).²⁶

The goal of these body-centric visualizations is a recognition that the body is an extension of pure non-intentional bliss and consciousness. Borrowed from its earlier application to refer to the “clan,” tantras use the term *kula* also to denote the body.²⁷ With the application of the term to also describe the world comprised of thirty-six Kaula categories, Kaulas identify both the body and the cosmos as referents of *kula*. Tantric imagery primarily relies on the Kaula system that maintains that the self is immanent²⁸ and the supreme divinity is embodied.²⁹ Rather than transcending the body, Kaulas therefore seek liberation within the body. The liberating experience is described in terms of the surge of the “cosmic bliss” (*jagadānanda*) that permeates all the lower strata of bliss. Bhairava images, specifically that of *Ānandabhairava*, stand for materialization of this experience. Body, in this understanding, is distilled bliss, and bondage is the lack of this awareness. Awakening, in this paradigm, is the gradual surge of bliss that expands the limit of somatic awareness and gives the sense of totality while being within the body.

Theoretical Assumptions Underlying Visualization Practices

Imagination is at the core of visualization. Although to imagine does require some imagery, this is not always the case. An act of imagination can also mean to suppose or to believe falsely, rather than to visualize; it can also mean to pretend or to think of a possibility. Not all of these cognitive activities are identical, and not all of these are relevant when addressing the imagery brought to the mind during the tantric practice of visualization. There are also reports that some people lack imagery in their cognitive process. Image consciousness may not always be as crucial in forming a fantasy as internal speech. Tantric practices, however, are unequivocal about the centrality of images in visualization practice. This focus or the lack thereof of imagery in cognitive processes goes beyond a mere socio-cultural studies. The contemporary “analogue” and “digital” debate over the nature of the mind in representing reality—whether mental imagery is a necessary condition for human cognition or whether there are any actual mental images when individuals cognize—all resonate with the classical Indian *sākāra* and *nirākāra* debate, in which the first position maintained that what individuals cognize is actually the imprints or the representations, literally the “images” (*ākāra*), and the second position maintained that consciousness directly apprehends reality without any mediation of images.

Contemporary cognitive theories take three approaches to analyzing images. The first maintains that mental images are picture-like or analogue. The next holds that there are no images but rather descriptions, or propositions. The third, “enactive theory,” stems from the understanding that vision is not a matter of information flowing into the brain through the eyes but an active seeking and extracting of desired information.³⁰ The first two theories treat images as unconscious, while the third theory gives the reflexivity of image-like concepts a space. In terms of Indian philosophy, consciousness may or may not have image-like representations, and at the same time, instances of cognition may or may not be maintained by a higher-order consciousness. Even when considering second-order consciousness, there may or may not be a self exclusive of the higher-order consciousness. These possibilities allow a number of theories to emerge.

Picture theory, most popular among the image theories, maintains that visual mental images represent things in more or less the same way as pictures do. This position relies on resemblance, a subjective relation established when the conscious mind focuses upon something. In order to do so, the mind has to be able to represent the entities and their relevant aspects to itself. The Sanskrit terms such as *bimba* (image), *pratibimba* (counter-image), and *ākāra* (image) also suggest the picture theory. This theory, however, has come under serious attack.³¹ Kosslyn explains this alternative theory in terms of a mental image that is embodied as a spatially extended two-dimensional pattern of neural excitation that occurs during vision.³² With this presupposition, Kosslyn argues that mental images are similar patterns, albeit generated from internal sources instead of sensory input. In the case of images that invite more than one interpretation, Kosslyn observed that subjects found it harder to interpret them differently in the absence of the actual physical image. What is meant here by “picture” is the patterns, and the use of the term is only metaphorical, as there is no image to be seen with our eyes. This is like a picture only

because it represents spatial relationships. Taking this discussion further, can these “quasi-pictures” be considered *vijñaptis*, or *vikalpas*, or *vṛttis*, or *pratyayas*—terms used broadly for mental states or concepts in Indian philosophies? While some (Yogācāra Buddhists in particular) maintain that instances of cognition are self-reflexive, most Indian philosophers disagree. What do the images used in visualization practices have to do with awareness? Arguing along the lines of Kosslyn, it is likely that visual consciousness arises when a person perceives an external image, and the consciousness embedded with imagery arises when the mind processes visual information. The problem in this suggestion, though, is that this constitutes a dichotomy between the external and the internal and conforms to a certain degree to the Cartesian model. This would make the tantric traditions that identify as non-dual through and through be the victim of the same form of dualism. Tantric philosophers do maintain that even the instances of cognition are the luminous/divine flow of self-aware consciousness, comparing the relationship of cognitive modes and the self with the central deity in a mandala and the deities in the periphery. In this monistic paradigm, the deities in the surrounding pictorial space are the very limbs of the central deity. Alternative to the above understanding of the picture theory is that images are merely neural processes that eventually transform into a representation. The problem still remains unresolved: How do the unconscious representations transform into conscious experiences? It is not necessary to go too far into the thorny jungle of cognitive theories in order to address tantric visualization. Nevertheless, the very consideration of images as “living,” common to all visualization practices, suggests that visual images are not merely inanimate replicas of something external. On the contrary, the subjective domain or the personal fantasies and imaginations and the objective reality or the input from the external stimuli are co-constituting images in the creative process of visualization. A mere conversation about tantric images in the absence of this understanding may fail to address the most important questions that overlap both the fields of cognitive science and tantric studies.

Noting some of these objections, Pylyshyn and some other scholars maintain that mental imagery is a form of description, comparing the way the human mind stores information with the operation of computers.³³ Although the internal brain language might be quite different from computer or common language, Pylyshyn argues that it is nonetheless language-like, as it consists of symbols that represent the entities in the same way that words of the familiar, everyday language do. In the case of the imagery, the relationship between sign and reference is maintained as subjective.

Returning to our primary concern, visualization practice is descriptive through and through. The process of actively constructing the mental imagery consists of reciting or recollecting the narrative/verses that outline the limbs of the deity or the parts of the mandala. Even after “construction” of the imagery, language accompanies the image in the form of mantras. More importantly, the process of actively imagining a deity involves deciphering the symbolism, a descriptive process parallel to creating the imagery. Constructing the limbs of the deity in the mental space includes calling to mind the significance of its limbs,

weapons, background, or vehicles. Since the primary concern of this text is the way meaning is activated in the mind during visualization, it is appealing to engage Pylyshyn's arguments and adopt the descriptive model. This method is not free from defects though. The same question arises: How do the representations that share nothing of the character of consciousness give rise to the conscious event?

In all accounts, contemplation of the meaning of any given imagery is central to visualization practices. The image of Kālī, for instance, is a symbolic representation of time. At the same time, Kālī also stands for violence and death. While her imagery evokes fear from the outsider's perspective, she evokes love and compassion among the believers. A single image can stimulate contradictory emotions, as she is both invoked as the supreme deity who represents cosmic dynamism, while at the same time she can be repulsive as she wears a girdle of bleeding hands and a rosary of skulls and entrails. Needless to say, the methods applied for reading texts do not properly address the images. Particularly when the meaning of words is considered finite and a linear reading is preferred over multivalent textual exegesis, no other approach could have been as alien as this for reading images. Nevertheless, issues such as whether the meaning of the parts of a sentence collectively generate sentential meaning and whether the meanings of the limbs and gestures of a deity collectively express what the deity herself stands for evoke the same philosophical bifurcation of particularism and holism.

Understanding meaning, or the process of deciphering, in this paradigm, is viewed as integral to the practice that gives the subjects direct encounter with the deity. It is in the religious context that the symbols become more than what they mean. Rituals, in this paradigm, function as a discourse with the deity, the image, or its placeholder. The meaning aspect of images brings to prominence the issue of hermeneutics. Just like linguistic units, images express meaning in relation to the parts, and so the meaning of a unit cannot be determined in isolation from other linked units. Rituals, wherein the image partakes of offerings, are where both the texts and images interplay in cultivating a transforming experience, and the discourse on images cannot bracket ritual texts and the observing agents, as the meaning derived is integral to these factors. Similar to the common language, the meaning of images is intrinsic to culture, and deciphering imagery found in one culture by borrowing cultural parameters from another is as ludicrous as assigning meaning to the words of one language by specifying similar-sounding words found in another language.

Due to the power of mental imagery in constructing and shaping external reality, images are commanding devices. Epistemologically, the status that ākāra or the "form" plays in classical Indian philosophy, particularly in Yogācāra, the Advaita of Śaṅkara, and the Trika system, cannot be dissociated from the soteriological issue of the application of imagery in transforming experience. The meticulous construction of images in the mind and consideration that these images are the bridge between the visible and the invisible suggests that the sākāra model calls upon the framework in which the hermeneutics of images applies. Besides being the topic of cognitive analysis, images have semiotic and hermeneutic values. Images embody both denotative and connotative aspects of meaning. According to Eco, "the characteristic of a connotative code is the fact that the further signification conventionally relies on a primary one."³⁴ Images are primarily connotative.

They utilize pre-established signs, such as colors, weapons, and vehicles to mean something. Since an image assembles various signs together, an image always manifests complex meaning. Dark color, for instance, denotes not only a specific quality, *tamas*, but also time. Snakes not only indicate poison but also suggest the serpentine force, *kubut als*. The cremation ground not only suggests death; it also indicates the meeting place between two worlds and the cyclical nature of life. These are just a few of the nuances found in an image of Kālī. Metonymic relation is vivid in these readings. These relations cannot be made without the aid of the cognitive faculty of imagination, which also facilitates the integration of language and vision.

Tantric visualization practice relies on the sophisticated blending of different inputs from various sources. In the conceptual blend, there are at least two source inputs that share something in common—the generic space—and in the blended space, a new “emergent structure” emerges, giving new values and properties. In tantric visualization, for example, a subject can select certain aspects from the real world; derive other aspects from the imagined space; and find, in the blended space, a fantasy-mixed reality in which the sense of the aspirant of what is real gets blurred, and the subject begins to experience a real-life event, encountering the things that are given by fancy. For instance, the subject has his/her own body schema as one domain and the divine body as the other, and in the blended space, the subject’s own embodied experience integrates what is somatically given with those that are fantasized. Tantric traditions broadly accept that the divine nature, pure consciousness, the Śiva nature, is inborn, and rituals and visualization practices have nothing uniquely new to achieve. What one can aspire to experience is considered as embodied or as already given, and one is only striving to look back, to remember, to walk through a reverse amnesia or anamnesis.³⁵ In this sense, tantric realization through visualization is similar to Platonic learning. Transforming one’s own self-experience becomes all the more feasible in this fluid transaction of imagined and real space, with the course of visualization being the meeting ground of the two processes. Visualization can be best explained by using the categories of body schema and body image. Body schema, in general, is a system of sensory-motor capacity that functions without awareness or perception-monitoring. Body image, on the other hand, stands for a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one’s own body. By means of visualization, the practitioner’s body schema and body image interplay, and through cognitive transformation, subjects become grounded in a new attitude toward their body and the self.³⁶

Visualization, in essence, is a complex cognitive process that integrates attention, memory, and imagination. While concepts, primarily body images, play a central role in ritual visualization, the process also remaps one’s emotional and cognitive response. Although the primary mechanism of visualization is the mind, the effect of the practice becomes etched within the body of the practitioner, with his somatic experiences being transformed

Primary Sources

The Vedic ritual paradigm is filled with imagery utilized in the process of visualization. During the Brāhmaṇic and early Upaniṣadic times, exegetical traditions evolved by establishing various significance of the Vedic rituals. *Śatapathabrahmāṇa* is exemplary among the classical texts to depict this process. The *Upaniṣads*, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* in particular, continue this tendency and expand further in developing the significance of rituals by means of visualization. An overall development of contemplative practice, a shift in cultural ethos, a decline of extravagant rituals, and a need for internalized practices to sustain the significance of the rituals turning archaic in changing times were some of the driving forces for this transformation. The emergence of yogic and tantric traditions epitomized this tendency with not only exaggerated visualization practices but also advanced visualization techniques. Texts such as *Vijñānabhairava* or *Yoginīhrdaya* are exemplary to demonstrate this process. Temple Hinduism, *māra ex art*, and the daily rituals of mental offerings (*mānasa-pūjā*) are a few examples for the study of visualization in everyday Hinduism. Substantial *pratiṣṭhā* literature dedicated to temple construction and the texts such as *Dhyānamālā* that address visualization of deity images provide a wide range of examples for visualization practices. Besides tantric traditions, both Yogācāra Buddhism and the Advaita of Śaṅkara utilize imagination to describe reality, and these schools are the key to grounding the philosophy of imagination in Hindu and Buddhist cultures. From the philosophical perspective, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is a significant text to explain imagination and consciousness by means of literary tropes and narratives. From the early Buddhist Sūtra texts, the *Laṅkāvatāra* is central to understanding the scope of imagination. The philosophy of Gauḍapāda is crucial in evaluating the role of phantasy and image consciousness.

Current State of Research

The discourse on image and visualization has a broader context, as research in the field of mental imagery advances. Whether our thoughts are similar to “images” or whether they are some form of speech is one of the key issues that has a broader interest by, and application to contemporary studies in neuroscience, cognitive science, psychology, and philosophy. A good review of the literature of these fields of research can be found in the Stanford Encyclopedia’s entry on “mental imagery.”³⁷ Zenon W. Pylyshyn’s book, *Seeing and Visualizing: It’s Not What You Think*³⁸ is groundbreaking, addressing the core theoretical issues involving visualization, particularly the relation of cognition, vision, and the scope of visual learning. For the psychological perspective, the *Journal of Mental Imagery* is worth exploring. For a broader cognitive scientific appeal, the *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion* is setting the trend. For the philosophy of mental imagery, the works of P. Bartolomeo,³⁹ Ned Block,⁴⁰ Michael Tye,⁴¹ and A. R. White⁴² are most significant. For the

neurological and computational approach to imagery, Kosslyn's works, *Image and Mind*,⁴³ and *Image and Brain: The Resolution of the Imagery Debate*⁴⁴ are noteworthy. Mark Turner's *The Artful Mind* is a noteworthy text for understanding human creativity in light of image and imagination.⁴⁵ This work is particularly helpful for those interested in reading on human creativity in light of neuroscience.

Scholars have yet to devote the attention that imagination and visualization in Hindu and Buddhist cultures deserve. Sthaneshwar Timalsina's *Seeing and Appearance* explores imagination and creativity from the Advaita perspective,⁴⁶ and "Gauḍapāda on Imagination" grounds the discourse on imagination from the classical Advaita philosophy of Gauḍapāda.⁴⁷ David Shulman's work, *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India*⁴⁸ has brought a new appeal to research in the field of cultural anthropology with a focus on imagination in Indian culture. Glen A. Hayes has addressed the cognitive domains of visualization with a focus on conceptual blending.⁴⁹ With a focus on Vaiṣṇava Sahajīyā tradition, Hayes highlights the cognitive domains of metonymy, metaphor, conceptual blending, memory, and imagination. Two recently published books by Sthaneshwar Timalsina, *Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach* and *Language of Images: Visualization and Meaning in Tantras* explore the rituals and philosophies utilized for visualization practices.⁵⁰ The first of these two texts explores the cognitive domains of visualization practices with a particular focus on metonymy, metaphor, and conceptual blending, while the second outlines the historical and metaphysical issues related to tantric visualization.

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Notes:

(1.) The term *upāsanā*, coming from Vedic literature, refers to various visualization practices. In the Vedic Brāhmaṇa and Upaniṣadic texts dedicated to certain visualizations, visualizing the sun as the Brahman, for instance, is most commonly understood by the term. In later Hinduism, the term is used to refer to any meditative practice or the worship of various deities. Some have analyzed the term with an etymology of “*upa* + ā + √*sad* + a” as “sitting next to.” Since the verbal base √*sad*, referring to motion, also describes knowing, the term *upāsanā* can be better explained as “knowing something with clarity” or “having an intimate knowledge about something.”

(2.) Kanhaiyalal Joshi, ed., *Brahmasūra, with the Bhāṣya of Śaṅkara*, vols. I and II (Delhi: Parimal Publication, 1982)

(3.) Neal Delmonico, “How to Partake in the Love of Kṛṣṇa,” in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 244-268.

(4.) David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Rāgānugā Bhakti Sādhana* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 124-132; Tony Stewart, “Reading for Kṛṣṇa’s Pleasure: Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Meditation, Literary Interiority, and the Phenomenology of Repetition,” *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* 14.1 (2005): 243-280; and Tony Stewart, *The Final Word: The Caitanya Caritāmṛta and the Grammar of Religious Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 273-316.

(5.) For discussion, see Nirukta, *The Nighantu and the Nirukta*, ed. and trans. Lakshman Sarup (Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1984).

(6.) For this discussion, see the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 9:6-10 and Śabara’s commentary thereon. *Mīmāṃsādarśana. With the Bhāṣya of Śabara upon Jaiminī’s Sūtras and the Prabhā Commentary*, ed. Subba Shastri (Patna: Anandashrama, 1953).

(7.) *tathā vigrahavatīm devatām upacaranti | yamaṇ daṇḍahastam ālikhanti kathayanti ca | tathā varuṇaṁ pāśahastam | indraṇ vajrahastam |* Śabara’s commentary on *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 9:6.

(8.) For further discussion on Vedic references, see Pandurang Vaman Kane, *Dharmaśāstra kā itihāsa*, vol. 1 (Lucknow: Uttar Prades Hindi Samsthan, 1980), 388-390.

(9.) Caturthīlā Śarmā, ed., *Sarvadevapratīṣṭhāprakāśa* (Mumbai: Khemaraj Srikrishnadas, 2009), 35-36.

(10.) *Bṛhatstotraratnākara*, one of the most widely circulated texts for prayer hymns, includes these “memory hymns in the morning” (*prātaḥsmaranastotra*) for Nārāyaṇa, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Caṇḍī, Sūrya, and Rāma.). *Bṛhatstotraratnākara* (Mumbai: Khemaraj Srikrishnadas, 2013), 392-396.

(11.) This is based on the text published in the last page of *Durgāsaptaśatī* (Gorakhpur: Gītā Press, 2007).

(12.) This is a summary of the first three verses from the *Śivamānasapūjāstotra*, attributed to Śaṅkara. This is widely circulated and is compiled in *Bṛhatstotraratnākara* (p. 140).

(13.) Harvey P. Alper, *Mantra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); and André Padoux, ed, *Mantras et diagrammes rituels dans l'Hindouisme* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1990).

(14.) For studies on the embodied aspects of mandala, see Kasulis in Jane Marie Law, *Religious Reflections on the Human Body* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 166–185; P. Beatson, *The Eye in the Mandala*; Patrick White: *A Vision of Man and God* (London: Paul Elek Books, 1976); Brenda E. F. Beck, “The Symbolic Merger of Body, Space, and Cosmos in Hindu Tamilnad,” *Contributions to Indian Society* 10.2 (1981): 213–243; Mircea Eliade, “Cosmological Homology and Yoga,” *Journal of Indian Society of Oriental Arts* 5 (1937): 188–203; and Elizabeth English, *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualizations, Rituals, and Forms* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002). For a general study on mandalas, see Alexis Sanderson, “Maṇḍala and Āgamic Identity in the Trika of Kashmir,” In Padoux, *Mantras et diagrammes rituels dans l'Hindouisme*, 169–207; and Gudrun Bühnemann, *Hindu Pantheon in Nepalese Line Drawings* (Varanasi: Indicia Books, 2003). For the alchemical use of mandalas, see David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Anne Hunt Overzee, *The Body Divine: The Symbol of the Body in the Works of Teilhard de Chardien and Rāmānuja* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

(15.) I am borrowing the phrase “*deha-devagṛha*” from Kṣemarāja, used in *Bhairavānukaraṇastava* 8. Raniero Gnoli, ed., “Miscellanea Indica,” *East and West* 9 (1958): 215–226. For a brief treatment of the deities in relation to the body, see Abhinavagupta, *Dehasthadevatāstotra* (ed. Pandey, K. C. 1963. 1963. *Abhinavagupta: An Historical and Philosophical Study*. Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series (952–953). For the symbolism of the body and its relationship with an altar, see Ronald Inden, “Paradigms of Body Symbolism: An Analysis of Selected Themes in Hindu Culture,” in *Indian Religion*, ed. Richard Burghart (London: Cruzon Press, 1985); Frits Staal, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of Fire Altar* (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 2001), vol. 2, pp. 95–126; Staal, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of Fire Altar* (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 2001), vol. 1, ch. 5; Anu Vedagiri, *Five Nṛsimha Temples in Andhra Pradesh and Their Function as a Religious Collective*, unpublished dissertation, Ohio State University, 2004; R. Vasantha and Reddy Purushotham, *Symmetry and Proportion in Indian Vāstu and Śilpa* (Delhi: Sharada Publishing House, 2004). For ritual originations of geometry, see A. Seidenberg, “The Ritual Origin of Geometry,” *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 1 (1962), 488–527; A. Seidenberg, “The Ritual Origin of the Circle and Square,” *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 25 (1981); and Somayajipad, Nambudiri, and Staal in Staal, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of Fire Altar*, vol. I, pp. 343–356.

(16.) For discussion on this concept, see Anne Hunt Overzee, *The Body Divine: The Symbol of the Body in the Works of Teilhard de Chardien and Rāmānuja* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Kasulis in Law, *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*, 166–185; Julius Lipner, “The World as God’s ‘Body’: in Pursuit of Dialogue with Rāmānuja,” *Religious Studies* 20 (1984): 145–161; E. J. Lott, *God and the Universe in the Vedāntic Theology of Rāmānuja: A Study in His Use of the Self-Body Analogy* (Madras: Rāmānuja Research Society, 1979), 2–35; and Lott in K. K. A. Venkatachari, ed., *Temple Art and Architecture* (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute), 30–46.

(17.) Deities are thus invoked as *mantramayatanu* or *vidyādeha*. See Mark Dyczkowski, *Manthānabhairavatantra:Kumārikakhaṇḍa* (12 vols.): The Section Concerning the Virgin Goddess. (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Center for Arts and D. K. Printworld, 2009), vol. 2, p. 25.

(18.) *Kubjikāmatatantra* 17.76cd–84. Cited in Dyczkowski, vol. 2, p. 26.

(19.) Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass, 1945), 35.

(20.) *śivaśaktyubhayonmeśasāmarasyodbhavam mahat |vīryam tasmād deha eva mahāpīṭhaḥ samudgataḥ || Mahānayaprakāśa*. Cited in Parimala, *Mahārthamañjarī* (MM), ed. Vrajavallabha Dviveda (Varanasi: Varanaseya Sanskrit University, 1972), 37.

(21.) *svadehasyaiva mukhyatayā pīṭhatvam*, Parimala in MM 34.

(22.) *sā svabhāvata ekāpi satī bhayaśokaharṣādyavasthāvaicitryād amlatiktamadhurādiprāyāneka-rasaviśeṣopasleṣīṇī*, Parimala in MM 35.

(23.) See *Tantrāloka* of Abhinavagupta with Viveka commentary of Jayaratha, ed. R. C. Dwivedi and and Navajivan Rastogi (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), esp. ch. 3.

(24.) *aṇḍamaye nijapiṇḍe*, MM 34a; *svaśarīramayo hi piṇḍaḥ*, Parimala in MM 34.

(25.) For the primary source on *piṇḍabrahmāṇḍa*, see Mallik, Kalyani, (ed. And trans.) *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati and Other Works of the Natha Yogis*. Poona: Oriental Book House, 1954. For discussion, see “The Cosmic Being,” in Alain Daniélou, *Hindu Polytheism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 42–59.

(26.) *navavyūhātmako devaḥ parānandaparātmakah*. Cited in Lakṣmīdharā, *Saundaryalaharī*, 34. [AU: I don’t see the preceding source cited in this document. Is the following source the citation? This seems confusing.] Appiah Kuppuswami, *Saundaryalaharī: With Ten Different Commentaries* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1991).

(27.) For various meanings of *kula*, see Pandey, *Abhinavagupta*, 594–597. Abhinava presents multiple meanings of *kula* in a single verse:

kulam ca parameśasya śaktiḥ sāmarthyam ūrdhvataḥ |

svātantryam ojo vīryam ca piṇḍah saṃvic charīrakam || Tantrāloka, Chapter 29.4.

For the application of the term to denote the body, see *kulaṁ śarīraṁ ity uktam...* cited in the Viveka commentary *Tantrāloka* 29.4.

(28.) *viśvamayam iti kulādyāmnāyanivīṣṭāḥ | Pratyabhijñāhṛdaya* (PH) 8.

Pratyabhijñāhṛdaya. [Kṣemarāja], ed. and trans. Jayadeva Singh (Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1991).

(29.) *tasyāṁ pariṇatāyāṁ tu na kaścit para iṣyate | Nityāśodaśikārṇava*: With the Commentaries Rjuvimarśinī and Artharatnāvalī. ed. Vrajavallabha Dviveda (Varanasi: Sampurnanda Samskrit University, 1984), Chapter 4, verse 5cd.

(30.) Of particular interest are Nigel J. T. Thomas, "An Active Perception Approach to Conscious Mental Content," *Cognitive Science* 23 (1999): 207–245; Thomas, "Mental Imagery, Philosophical Issues About," *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*, vol. 2, ed. L. Nadel (London: Nature Publishing, 2003), 1147–1153; Thomas, "Visual Imagery and Consciousness," *Encyclopedia of Consciousness*, vol. 2, ed. L. Nadel (London: Nature Publishing, 2009), 445–457; and Thomas, "Mental Imagery," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

(31.) Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Gilbery Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and D. Dennett, *Content and Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 1969).

(32.) S. M. Kosslyn, *Image and Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); S. M. Kosslyn, "The Medium and the Message in Mental Imagery: A Theory," *Psychological Review* 88 (1981): 46–66; S. M. Kosslyn, *Ghosts in the Mind's Machine: Creating and Using Images in the Brain* (New York: Norton, 1983); and S. M. Kosslyn, *Image and Brain: The Resolution of the Imagery Debate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

(33.) Z. W. Pylyshyn, "What the Mind's Eye Tells the Mind's Brain: A Critique of Mental Imagery," *Psychological Bulletin* 80 (1973): 1–25; Z. W. Pylyshyn, "The Imagery Debate: Analogue Media versus Tacit Knowledge," *Psychological Review* 88 (1981): 16–45; Z. W. Pylyshyn, "Mental Imagery: In Search of a Theory," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 25 (2002): 157–237.

(34.) Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 55.

(35.) Glen A. Hayes, "Conceptual Blending Theory, 'Reverse Amnesia,' and the Study of Tantra," *The Journal of Hindu Studies* (June 2012): 1–17.

(36.) Glen A. Hayes, "Possible Selves, Body Schemas, and *Sādhana*: Using Neuroscience in the Study of Medieval Vaiṣṇava Hindu Tantric Texts," *Religions* 5.3 (2014): 684–699.

(37.) Nigel J. T. Thomas, "Mental Imagery," 2014.

(38.) Zenon Pylyshyn, *Seeing and Visualizing: It's Not What You Think* (Stanford, CA: MIT Press, 2003).

(39.) P. Bartolomeo, "The Relationship between Visual perception and Visual Mental Imagery: A Reappraisal of the Neuropsychological Evidence," *Cortex* 38 (2002): 357-378.

(40.) N. Block, ed., *Imagery* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

(41.) M. Tye, *The Imagery Debate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

(42.) A. R. White, *The Language of Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

(43.) S. M. Kosslyn, *Image and Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

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(45.) Mark Turner, ed., *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity*.

(46.) Sthaneshwar Timalsina, *Seeing and Appearance: History of the Advaita Doctrine of Drṣṭiṣrṣṭi*, Indo-Halle Series 10 (Aachen, Germany: Shaker Verlag, 2006).

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(48.) David Shulman, *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2012).

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(50.) Sthaneshwar Timalsina, *Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach* (London: Routledge, 2015); and Sthaneshwar Timalsina, *Language of Images: Visualization and Meaning in Tantras* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

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